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ABSTRACT

This brief technical statement sets forth how the Further Education Unit Board of Management views the task of coming to grips with a training/education philosophy concerned with competence. It starts from the viewpoint that there is a common concern to raise standards of education and training; that the Board can support the Manpower Services Commission endeavors to move toward a competence-based system; and that wider access to training and jobs should be a priority. A wider definition of competence than that associated with working life is then offered, one that embraces formal and informal learning, extends beyond occupational skills into life skills, and requires changes in attitudes as well as in methodology. Examples from education/training are given on how competence can be defined, understood, delivered, and evaluated. The role and accreditation of experience is considered, and the problems of assessing competence are discussed. (YLB)

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Towards a Competence-Based System

An FEU View

August 1984

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Dear Sir/Madam

What follows is a brief technical statement on how the FEU Board of Management views the task of coming to grips with a training/education philosophy that is concerned with competence rather than time-serving. The FEU believes that this concept applies as much to education as it does to training, provided always that it does not result in mechanistic, illiberal and restrictive practices.

This short document starts from the viewpoint that there is a common concern to raise standards of education and training; that we can support the MSC endeavours to move towards a competence-based system 'on the understanding that education is an essential contributory factor'; and that wider access to training and jobs should be a priority.

The quid pro quo of this is a wider definition of competence than that associated with working life: embracing formal and informal learning, and extending beyond occupational skills into life skills. Such a definition requires changes in attitudes as well as in methodology. Examples from education/training are given on how competence can be defined, understood, 'delivered' and evaluated. The role and accreditation of experience is considered, and the problems of assessing competence are discussed. The FEU believes that widening the definition of competence poses problems that have yet to be solved, but agreement on such a definition would be a starting point. 'In some cases this may mean different standards; in all cases it should mean higher standards.'

It is hoped that this document will contribute to progress by showing that a competence-based system is compatible with a progressive approach to education/training and that the problems to be solved are not those of curriculum development.

Jack Mansell

Jack Mansell
Chief Officer

Towards a Competence-Based System

Raising Standards

1 There is a common concern to raise our standards of education and training. Whether the concern is expressed in terms of 16+ examinations, New Training Initiative (NTI) aims or employer expectations—the objectives are invariably framed in terms of skills and competences. Alongside this concern is a growing realisation that many of the ways in which we define and measure competence are not always realistic or fully understood.

2 The FEU Board of Management firmly believes that the achievement of higher levels of competence is an aim which should be supported. This short document suggests that if we are to pursue this aim successfully, then we need to ensure that our concepts and valuation of competence relate to the changing needs of society and are not unduly restrictive. In some cases this may mean different standards; in all cases it should mean higher standards.

3 The Manpower Services Commission (MSC) New Training Initiative endorsed by a Government White Paper[1], set a target date of 1985 for recognised standards for our main occupational skills to replace time-serving. For this target to be met, there needs to be a productive partnership between education and training, committed to a set of aims which cover the development of competence for present (or possible) employment; understanding of the industrial, social and economic context; preparation for change and provision for individual

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development and progression.

4 The FEU supports the MSC endeavours to move towards a competence-based system, on the understanding that education is regarded as an essential, contributory factor. The development of such a system is by no means simple, it requires not only changed attitudes but quite specific professional expertise and a higher degree of co-ordination between all the participants.

After YTS

5 The framework of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) is now settling down and, whilst many still see scope for improvement, by general acknowledgement it is 'evolutionary' and higher standards are not only possible but expected. Its main mode of operation, however, is based on the acquisition of learning through work-experience. However valid this mode may be, the recognition and accreditation of such learning remain tentative in their implementation; and progression into employment, further training or education remains uncertain.

6 An MSC aim related to Objective 1 of NTI is 'for a training system which enables all workers to acquire a basic range of skills and to develop and adapt them throughout their working lives';[2] and Objective 3 reaffirmed the need for adults to 'acquire, increase or update their skills'. Few, if any, disagreed with either the objective or the aim.

7 In its response to NTI, the FEU also agreed with the above but said that 'many of the "skills" and their mastery are inadequate in the way they are defined, taught, learned and tested ... many of our existing definitions are unnecessarily specific: skills are not the prerogative of a few apprenticeships'. Since then the MSC has not only confirmed that Objective 1 means progress related to achievement of specified standards of skill rather than the passage of time, but that it involves two principles—securing wider access to training and to jobs; and—offering opportunities for progression.

8 We have, elsewhere,[3] deliberately widened the definition of basic skills so that it encompasses an individual's synthesis of 'knowledge, skills, experience and attitudes'. It follows from this that the competences that emerge from such a synthesis must be regarded as a central element of personal development. If this is accepted, then to restrict competence to employment and jobs is unrealistic and probably a shocking waste of talent. We are thus fully in favour of the notion of 'skill ownership' as mooted by the Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS). We do, however, question its apparent restriction to working life and work-based modes of learning, and would endorse wider interpretations.

9 What is needed is a wider definition of competence than that associated with working life. Examples abound to demonstrate the vast array of talent that ordinary people in ordinary jobs can demonstrate through hobbies and other out of work interests. Many of these talents are underutilised in day-to-day working situations, and with the increasing use of new technology and earlier retirement we may have to recognise that this underutilisation of talent will be for many a permanent characteristic of their employment. A longer discussion of 'the quality of work' is not appropriate here, but it must not be forgotten. There are, inevitably, differing perspectives on the aims and purposes of training and education among the various contributors to the process. Trainees, trainers, educators, employers and society at large will all have ideas of aims and purposes. There is a large measure of agreement but there are also legitimate differences; and for true progression these differences should be reconciled. An agreed definition of competence would help in the process of accommodation.

Defining Competence

10 Competence can be defined as *the possession and development of sufficient skills, knowledge, appropriate attitudes and experience for successful performance in life roles*. Such a definition includes employment and other forms of work; it implies maturity and responsibility in a variety of roles; and it includes experience as an essential element of competence.

11 It is the place of experience in a competence based system that is generally uncertain. Overvalued, it can restrict opportunities for the young and otherwise inexperienced; undervalued, it can restrict access for the apparently less qualified. To obtain an appropriate balance it is useful to recognise that there are two basic modes of progression. Firstly, a traditional mode, based on formal learning and certification—often, although not always, associated with access: to training, education and/or jobs. Secondly, progression based on 'value added' experience, usually the result of informal learning—often, although not always, associated with what happens after access: recognised by observation and described by reports. Both modes are complementary, but each requires the translation of formal or informal learning experiences into competence. Such translations cannot take place 'once-and-for-all' and for the 'value added' function particularly, it is a continuous process. Recognition of these two modes of progression allows us to make use of a wider view of experience in the individual's past than is now commonly done. It has long been argued that the practice of ignoring relevant prior experience on entry to many training/education schemes is a wasteful and demotivating one. All too

often there is a resistance to giving credit for anything other than conventional and well tried qualifications. The notion of accepting experience-based learning (as well as accrediting traditional learning) for progression purposes has yet to be accepted, and what opportunities do exist are insufficiently exploited.'

12 We would therefore contend that genuine support for the standards-based philosophy of NTI will only be sustained if the definition of competence is accepted as one which embraces formal and informal learning, and extends beyond that of occupational skills into life skills. With this extension should go the acceptance that if distinctions between education and training for work competence are unrealistic, then distinctions between work and life competences are equally so. If education and training are to be considered as related processes then the concepts of transferability, skill ownership, competence and standards must relate to more than occupational skills. Competences derived from occupational roles can be transferable to other roles, and vice-versa.

13 With this wider definition comes a responsibility for the education/training sectors to adjust their curricula and methods. Access, opportunity and progression need to be wider. The YTS scheme, in theory at least, is an open-access programme, as indeed are many other education/training programmes. In practice, however, access and progression are often constrained by restrictive selection processes, based on outmoded methods of assessment and certification which, in turn, are themselves often based on restricted definitions of competence.

The Characteristics of a Competence Based System

14 The essential characteristics of many competence-based systems are:

i. a careful definition of the competence to be mastered (see Paragraph 15);
ii. an understanding of the definition by the learner (see Paragraph 16);
iii. an appropriate 'delivery' of the means by which learners can acquire competence (see Paragraphs 17–19);
iv. valid assessment and accreditation (see Paragraphs 20–22).

With a restricted and mechanistic view of competence, there is little in the above that is not already well provided for by the education/training systems. A wider definition of competence however, such as we attempt in Paragraphs 9–12 above, requires a more complex approach. Each of these characteristics is discussed below.

15 The definition of a competence should include not only the skills and

attitudes necessary for its mastering but also an understanding of the various contexts to which that competence could relate. For example:

Driving a car involves more than just knowledge of the Highway Code and technical skills of control and handling when driving various cars in different weather and road conditions. It requires 'road sense' and the ability to cope with a variety of different data and situations. There is an added social responsibility which takes account of other motorists, cyclists, pedestrians, etc.

Most people would accept a complex definition of the competence to drive and we have in fact a hierarchy of 'qualifications' to illustrate that complexity.

16 It follows that the understanding of the definition of competence by the learner also becomes more complex, particularly if we are to encourage flexibility through the concepts of skill ownership and transferability. For example:

Skills in food preparation and cookery are built up from a technical knowledge and skills base of simple tasks, progressing to simple dishes and then to more complex dishes, often in a specialised production area or section. In real work situations, especially in smaller kitchens, this specialisation does not always exist. Cooks need to organise their work schedules not only to ensure that separate portions or dishes are presented properly cooked or prepared at the right time for service, but that a number of different preparation and cooking processes are controlled simultaneously. Scheduling requires a knowledge and understanding of preparation and processing times, assembly and presentation times, ordering and sequencing priorities.

When called upon to work in a different production situation, well trained workers should find that these skills and acquired relevant experiences are transferable: the menu and dishes may differ, the layout and equipment or volume of production may vary, but the skill of organising and adapting work schedules remains the same. A variety of different kitchen experiences adds up to 'value added' experience referred to in Paragraph 12 and which may be highly regarded by a future employer. Most trainees, in recognising that they require a range of experiences, demonstrate their understanding of the competences they are expected to acquire.

17 Our delivery systems in education and training tend to be unnecessarily polarised: between academic and vocational learning, between high and low-level teaching, between 'real' work-based and 'abstract' classroom assignments, and so on. We probably have much to learn as professionals about how we can organise the acquisition of competence (in the way we now wish to define it) by a wide range of

learners. Teachers and instructors of conventional skills tend to concentrate on well defined outputs, sometimes in a restrictive way; e.g. emphasising accuracy but neglecting team relationships. General education teachers, in concentrating on life skills and processes, sometimes neglect work competence. These are over-simplified stereotypes but many would accept that much of our teaching, and thus our students' learning, is too compartmentalised. Teams of teachers relating to cross-disciplinary aims and objectives can help to demonstrate the unity of learning. A closer relationship between work-experience and off-the-job education would also help. New subjects, like Computer Literacy, which eschew many of the conventional subject boundaries, involve new learning strategies, challenge some of our conventions of ability level and give a good basis for new approaches. Experience is obviously a key strategy in delivering competence, but experience alone, without understanding, is not enough. Teachers need to work together and with those in industry and commerce in planning integrated approaches; they need to evaluate the outcomes of cross-disciplinary teaching; and most importantly they need to reflect on their own teaching experiences and contribute to the team's understanding of their work.

18 It probably follows from the above that if increased effort is put into wider definitions of competence by programme designers, and increased effort is exerted by the trainee into understanding these definitions, then teachers may need to put increased effort into the delivery of that competence. Whether we use educationally derived core objectives or transfer learning objectives such as those described by IMS[5], the implications for effective organisation of the acquisition of competence are the same. They identify the need for well designed learning assignments in which trainees have to involve themselves in the essential processes of finding out what they need to know in order to perform a task, doing that task in familiar and unfamiliar circumstances, and participating with their teacher and/or supervisor in the assessment of that task. For example: IMS transfer learning objectives associated with an Occupational Training Family (OTF) objective 'Detect faults', are described as follows:

Find out what faults to expect and look for when working with an unfamiliar material or machine;

Find out what faults to expect and look for when working with a familiar material or machine to make an unfamiliar product; and

Demonstrate (if possible) the recognition of faults when working with

a) an unfamiliar material or machine; and

b) a familiar material or machine to make an unfamiliar product.

For the teacher/instructor to organise this into a learning assignment, considerable discrimination and preparation are required, ranging from the choice of appropriate materials, machines and products to the organisation of appropriate instruction, demonstration, observation and evaluation techniques. For the learner, the tasks are no less arduous involving as they do the acquisition of knowledge and skills, their demonstration and evaluation.

19 The important point to make perhaps is that the experience compressed into that single objective is enriched and significantly extended by the time many other objectives have been fulfilled—either in a structured, formal way such as described above, or in a less formal way, such as obtained through day-to-day work. The sum total of added value over a period of time must be considerable. Having 'delivered' (or collected) competence, employers and tutors too often fail to recognise it, especially by accreditation through appropriate assessment.

20 This leads into the assessment of competence, about which much has been and will continue to be written. This is understandable as few of us like being assessed, especially if we consider the assessment to be unfair, unjustified and associated with failure. On the other hand, most of us recognise the need for competence to be recognised and accredited. Thus, for many who wish to receive accreditation, whether it leads to a driving licence, a prize at a flower-show, entrance to a course or a new job—some form of assessment seems inevitable. Many of the existing methods of assessment are well tried and will undoubtedly continue to form the basis of the traditional mode of progression we have described in Paragraph 11 above. Coupled with the type of analysis now being used by CGLs, conventional assessment can continue to relate to many aspects of occupational competence. A wider and therefore more complex definition of competence such as we have described can only be served by a correspondingly wider array of assessment methods. This is why profile and portfolio methods of recording assessment are favoured by the FEU. An over-simplified definition of competence has resulted in a mechanistic approach to assessment and accreditation. Real life competences are rarely simple and can rarely be assessed simply. More work obviously needs to be done in this area. Even when assessed, however, competence is not always given credit. We have said in Paragraph 11 above that experience is a key component of competence, but value added experience is rarely held in such high esteem as paper qualifications based on the more formal teaching, learning and assessment methods.

21 Progress has been made in the assessment of experiential learning, most of it outside the UK. It is not a soft option, but there are

encouraging signs that many of the Further and Higher Education (FHE) validating bodies are increasingly prepared to accredit experience, although an FEU publication[7] has indicated that institutions are not fully exploiting their existing authority in this respect. Further work done by the FEU[8] has elicited stronger statements of intent from some validating bodies; e.g., the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) 'endorses the general rationale of bringing work and formal education closely together'. It thus follows that if improvements can be made in the assessment of competence, however acquired, some progress is possible in accrediting it.

22 The demonstration of competence ranges from direct observation in the situation in which it generally has to be exercised, to some form of assessment away from that situation. Formal tests are invariably artificial but this does not necessarily make them invalid. Indeed, they may be in some cases the only way of measuring those skills associated with transfer. Much progress can be made in assessing value added experience by the construction of carefully designed descriptors of performance. For example:

social working in a group:	'always keeps other members of the nursing team informed about patients.'
accepting responsibility	'Uses own initiative when cleaning out patient's room.'
working with clients	'Can recognise if patients are uncomfortable and turn in bed.'
decision-making planning:	'Can lay out a trolley in readiness for bedside treatment of patients.'
obtaining information:	'Used the college library to find information for his/her project.'
assessing own results:	'Can recognise whether or not his/her work is satisfactory both when nursing and during kitchen work.'

The above descriptors have been constructed in the context of assessing competence in a range of 'caring' skills[9]. They will be seen to cover some of the skills we identified in Paragraph 18 such as finding information for oneself and performing in both familiar and unfamiliar circumstances. Such descriptors, when satisfactorily achieved, collected and recorded alongside more conventional test results, can provide a worthwhile profile of competence. Such descriptors can be used to construct inventories of skill, to be completed by employees and those seeking employment, training or education, as a basis for counselling and/or selection.

Conclusions

23 All of the above pose many problems, none of them new, and none of them able to be solved by a single agency. There is much work to be done but it is hoped that the above offers the framework for a basis for co-operative action between the various agencies. Agreement on a wider definition of competence would be a start in the right direction for we have pointed out elsewhere[10] that distinctions between employment, self-employment and unemployment are fragile, and the impact of new technology will make them more so. The necessity of a wide base of competences is well recognised in the design of YTS, (Objective 2). The MSC has recognised that its Adult Training Strategy (Objective 3), should not focus simply on narrowly defined economic objectives but that it must equip individuals with general competences and a capacity for personal development. A concept of skills-based training such as described in MSC Objective 1, related as it is to 'the jobs available',[11] could be equally fragile, and an appreciation of the need to similarly underpin Objective 1 by more general competences is perhaps the first step towards a competence-based system. Once this step is taken, the technical problems of defining understanding, learning and valuing competence, can be tackled by the various agencies in co-operation. Paragraphs 13–21 indicate that many of these problems are being tackled and the FEU is willing to work with others towards their solution.

Footnotes

1 *A New Training Initiative: a programme for action.* Cmnd 8455. HMSO, 1981
2 para 26 of *A New Training Initiative: a consultative document.* MSC, 1981
3 *Basic skills* FEU, 1982
Hayes, C. et al. *Training for skill ownership.* IMS, 1983
4 See *Curriculum opportunity.* FEU, 1982
5 op cit. *Training for skill ownership*
6 *The process—competence base for technical education.* City and Guilds Broadsheet. January, 1984.
7 *Curriculum Opportunity.* FEU, 1982
8 *Progressing from vocational preparation.* FEU, 1982
9 *Who cares?* FEU, 1982
10 *FEU Response to 'Towards an adult training strategy'.*
11 Para 23 of *NTI: a consultative document.* MSC, 1981

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The objects for which **The Further Education Unit (FEU)** *is established are to promote, encourage and develop the efficient provision of further education in the United Kingdom and for that purpose:*
a) to review and evaluate the range of existing further education curricula and programmes and to identify overlap, duplication, deficiencies and inconsistencies therein;
b) to determine priorities for action to improve the provision of further education and to make recommendations as to how such improvement can be effected;
c) to carry out studies in further education and to support investigations of and experimentation in, and the development of further education curricula and to contribute to and assist in the evaluation of initiatives in further education;
d) to disseminate and publish information and to assist in the dissemination and publication of information about recommendations for and experiments and developments in further education.